

10 Hurt In Wadhams Fire, Explosion



A hot one, some 40,000 gallons of "regular" gasoline are shown going up in flames at the Wadham Oil Co. marine terminal tank farm Friday night. Four Wadhams employees and six city firemen were injured by the blaze and explosion. The photo was taken by Clarence Bredell, Green Bay Press Gazette chief cameraman, a few minutes after the tank exploded.

Spark From Pump Sets Gas Ablaze

City Feels Force of Blast At Fuel Storage Terminal

By Bob White Press-Gazette Staff Writer - Sept 11, 1954

A fire and a shattering explosion rocked the Wadhams Marine Terminal at Prairie and Bylsby Avenues Friday evening, injuring 10 men and keeping Green Bay's entire northwest side in peril for several hours.

Originating in a nearly empty 5,000,000 gallon gasoline storage tank, the blaze quickly increased to devastating intensity and exploded within minutes. Wadhams officials declined to estimate the loss.

At least one man was reported to have seen the glow of the blaze at Krakow, 25 miles northwest of here.

Virtually all windows in the North Western Railway round house, 100 yards across Prairie Ave from the source of the explosion, were shattered.

Many persons living on the east side reported that they felt the concussion. Those nearby said the huge mushroom of flame, perhaps 200 feet high, looked like photographs of an A-bomb explosion.

The injured, six of them Green Bay firemen, were hurt as they fled from the exploding tanks. The other four hurt as a result of the explosion were Wadhams employees, who were pumping gasoline from the tank into an adjoining one when the blaze and blast occurred.

List of Injured

Only one of the blast victims was reported in critical condition late this morning. He is Walter Junchen, 35, a Wadhams employee who resides at 209 Oxford Ave., Green Bay.

The injured firemen are: Asst. Chief Ray Clark, 49, lacerations to the scalp, apparently from flying fragments of metal.

Don Kolbusz, 32, burns on the hands and face.

Louis Leanna, 59, burns on the body, hands, and face.

Harvey Graume, 26, burns on the hands and face.

Don Koeppen, 31, burns on the hands and face.

Others on the Wadhams' i casualty list include Charles Miller, 44. Milwaukee, in fair condition with multiple burns; Curtis Anderson, 41, Milwaukee, and Walter Carlson, 51, Grafton, Rt. 1, both with less serious burns.

A tenth victim of the blaze, Fireman Patrick Maloney, was brought to the hospital for observation and treatment after the peak of the blaze had passed, He was not believed to be in serious condition.

All of the injured are being treated at St. Vincent's Hospital.

Started in Pump Motor

The suddenness of the blaze and blast is reflected in its un official cause, based on information obtained by local firemen.

Preliminary reports indicate the fire broke out at 7:06 p.m. as the four Wadhams' work men were transferring gasoline from the one tank to another by means of a small motorized pump. The tank was being drained in preparation for repairs. Wadhams officials said.

Suddenly, it was reported, the pump motor quit. In attempting to start it again a spark was thrown off which jumped to the tank and set off the fire in a split second.

Firemen and W a d h a ms' company officials theorized that the explosion was touched off by a mixture of gasoline and air which created an immediate and tremendous pressure on the inside of the huge tank.

The explosion might not have occurred, it was reasoned, had the tank been full or nearly full. Containing storage space for more than 5, 000,000 gallons, the tank held only about 40,000 gallons when the fire began.

That the blaze was one of the most dangerous on record here was immediately apparent to all onlookers who were able to get within its immediate vicinity.

Good Fire-Fighting

Also immediately apparent was the fine work of the Green Bay firemen who undoubtedly prevented the fire from spreading into what might have been the city's worst catastrophe. They were aided by the earthen dikes surrounding the tank, which served as a firebreak.

The local department, according to city officials, responded in the same efficient manner that characterized its handling of the difficult City Hall Annex and Mayfair Lounge fires last year.

Seven rigs from three stations immediately rushed to the scene. On and off-duty, firefighters - 82 of them in all - manned the intricate equipment.

The Preble Fire Dept., under the direction of Chief Richard Panure, was alerted and was placed on a stand-by basis.

Chief's Vacation Cut

Green Bay Chief John Anderson, in the midst of his vacation, left his home and sped to the scene immediately after being notified.

Also responding quickly and efficiently were city and county police and the sheriff's department. Personnel from, these groups set up an emergency police line extending more than a mile from the fire's source. Their work is credited with eliminating much confusion and potential danger which would have occurred had curious motorists been allowed to penetrate the blaze area en masse.

The firefighters' danger was reflected vividly by 11 other tanks surrounding the one that blew up.

Firemen sprayed thousands of gallons of water on the tank directly adjacent to the exploded one, keeping it cool and preventing pressure from being built up inside.

Had the second tank exploded, it was pointed out, others on the terminal property all would have been potential powder kegs.

Families Evacuated

Sidelights of the spectacular blaze included the evacuation of two families living near the Wadhams terminal at Bylsby and Prairie Avenues.

Mrs. Marvin Schude, 40, 1278 N. Broadway, suffered shock brought on by the sudden explosion and was taken to Beilin Hospital for observation and treatment. Her husband and their seven children were evacuated from their home which was situated dangerously close to the fire. They were put up temporarily at the Broadway Hotel.

Also taken to the Broadway Hotel were Mr. and Mrs. Charles Carter and their three children. The Carters reside at 1126 N. Broadway. Both families were evacuated by members of the Brown County Red Cross Chapter who were praised by firemen and Police Inspector Francis Wigman for¹ their quick and efficient work.

Officials also praised the Green Bay Filter Center, which dispatched its airmen to aid with the police emergency lines.

Caller Summoned Help

Singled out for individual praise was Ed Rybicki, night crew caller at the North Western Round House, who was the only known eye-witness to the actual explosion, "Everything just blew," Rybicki declared. "I was in my office and everything just blew!"

His office windows shattered by the force of the blast, Rybicki took temporary cover, on the floor, then quickly jumped up, called the Green Bay hospitals, and arranged for immediate ambulance service for the injured.

As a direct result of his action, all available doctors in Green Bay were alerted immediately and were at St. Vincent's when the first of three ambulances began arriving with the injured.

Adding to the tenseness of the situation was the prolonged wailing of the North Western shop whistle, sounding the emergency signal. It was blown to call the railroad's firemen when the flames, carried toward the roundhouse, threatened to spread to railroad property.

The blast was the signal for a fast and sudden exodus of: automobiles of spectators who had crowded into the danger zone. One of the fastest getting out was the driver of a huge transport truck of gasoline.